LOVE'S ADVENTURE
I John 3:11-18
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On April 9, 1945, forty years ago this month, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed by his S.S. guards at Flossenburg prison, as a traitor to the Third Reich. Bonhoeffer was a young German pastor and theologian with a growing international following. When the Nazis came to power in 1933 he was a pacifist. In time, however, his mind changed: he became an outspoken critic of the government and ultimately joined a conspiracy to assasinate Adolf Hitler. The plan failed. Bonhoeffer and others were arrested. Several days before the end of the war he was hanged. On the fortieth anniversary of his death the Christian Century editorialized: "As perilous as the issues of our time may seem, Bonhoeffer's legacy reminds us that we must take sides, that indifference is the worst form of immorality." (April, 1985, p. 343)

Bonhoeffer is a reminder that to love God intentionally, to chose to be a Christian in this world is a deep commitment. It can be an adventure at best, a very costly business at worst. Bonhoeffer's is a reminder to those of us not forced by circumstance to make a decision which will determine whether or not we live, that there is more to life, in Christian terms, than putting in time. His brief but publically faithful life, is a reminder that by Christian criteria the meaning of a life has more to do with the choices and commitments made in love than the number of years it endured. From his prison cell he wrote:

> "A person must plunge into the life of a godless world...To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some form of ascetism...but to be a man. (Letters and Papers from Prison, July 18, 1944, p. 222-223)

The problem, of course, is life: How to live it fully; how to enjoy it; how to get as much out of it as we possibly can; how to go to sleep peacefully at night with some sense that this day and the accumulation of all these days I am living has been worth the effort, that it all is adding up to something. Knowledge of our mortality is a mixed blessing. Without it we probably would not create anything. Herbert Maslow, recuperating from a heart attack, wrote to a friend that if you knew you were never going to die, love, ecstacy and beauty would not be possible. And yet the morbid but accurate observation that life is merely the process of dying does have a sobering affect when one stumbles upon it in the wee hours of some sleepless night. Macbeth's lament is universal:

> "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time;
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!"

How to live? How to live with enough intentionality and commitment so that our lives transcend, are free from, the captivity of death? That is the human question. The answer, I submit, is a truth the saints and martyrs have seen, a truth lived and taught by Jesus Christ: a truth to which the Church has born witness in its better moments. It is contained in a deceptively simple phrase in the First Epistle of John..."For we know that we have passed from death into life because we have loved the brethren."

That is the astounding assertion. You move from the morbid captivity of death into the bright fullness of life by loving your sisters and your brothers! Church tradition has always linked the three brief epistles which bear the name John with the beloved disciple. Scholarship has determined that they were written quite late, however, perhaps seventy years after the fact. But the tradition that at least links them with John persists. In fact Robert Browning wrote a wonderful poem once, "A Death in the Desert," in which the very old disciple John is hiding, in the desert, near death, attended by a few devoted followers who themselves will soon be martyred. He realizes that he is the last and he reflects:

"...it is long
Since James and Peter had release by death,
And I am only he, your brother John,
Who saw and heard, and could remember all.
...there is left on earth
No one alive who knew (consider this!)
Saw with his eyes and handled with his hands
That which was from the first, the Word of life.
How will it be when none more saith
'I saw'?"

In that situation, when the last eye witness is about to die, the last to have seen Jesus, talked with him, touched him, the problem becomes getting the essence of it recorded so it won't be lost. And these little epistles, written out of that situation testify that the essence of it is love.

> "See what love the father has given us, that we should be called Children of God," he wrote. "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear," he asserted. "God is love," he observed, "and the person who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in that person."

Students have always known that the author of these letters is really a very gifted thinker who introduces a whole new category of religious thought. Most religion, certainly the rich Hebrew religion of Jesus relies on the ideas of sin and righteousness, goodness and badness, to talk about the human condition. This author proposes several interesting alternatives. Instead of sin and righteousness he uses darkness and light, and hatred and love. He wrote: "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all...The one who loves his brothers and sisters abides in the light. The one who hates walks in the darkness."

There is a very important Christian point here. It is one we are inclined to forget. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a new set of ideas about God, it is about an incarnate love that gets itself lived in the life of the Christian community. The Gospel is not a new philosophic system but an invitation to live a new style of life. We are saved, this author proposes, not by adopting orthodox doctrine, or by growing in our understanding of the mysteries of God, but by "loving the brothers and sisters."

Ours is not a receptive climate for that basic Christian understanding, I fear. Each age has its particular challenges for the church. Some of them have been in the form of outright hostility and persecution. In other ages the challenge has

come in a seductive sympathy with religion which either doesn't understand or doesn't like the essence of this Gospel. That is our situation. Our culture asks the question of life's meaning and prospect, holds up the solitary human self as the answer, and says:

> "...this is it: discover it, get into yourself, actualize it, realize it, celebrate it, indulge yourself, you deserve a break today, you are worth it, look out for number 1, be your own best friend, etc."

The New York Times last week reviewed an important new book, Habits of the Heart, based on four major research studies and edited by Robert Bellah, a University of California sociologist. The book is a study of individualism in America and it concludes that individualism, which when balanced with a commitment to equality is dynamic, has today tipped the scales. "We are concerned," the authors write, "that this individualism may have grown cancerous...that it may be destroying (us)..."

The Times review included a most thoughtful paragraph:

> "We have never before faced a situation that called our deepest assumptions so radically into question. Our problems today are not just political. They are moral and have to do with the meaning of life...we are beginning to understand that our common life requires more than an exclusive concern for material accumulation. Perhaps life is not a race whose only goal is being foremost." (New York Times, 4/14/85)

It would seem at first that if the goal is to get as much out of life as possible, we ought to do as much for ourselves as possible. We ought to focus our energies, our creativity, our time and resources on this project. The only trouble is that it doesn't work. It ought to but it doesn't. Our best humanity is not affirmed by egotism. The best in us is not celebrated by self indulgence. The psychological disciplines know that about us. And I'm amazed at the surprising places that discovery turns up...A poem of D. H. Lawrence, for instance. Now, Lawrence is not an artist one would normally characterize as self denying, but he wrote once about the dehumanizing power of obsessive self centeredness.

> "I was weary of the world
> I was so sick of it,
> Everything was tainted with myself,
> Skies, trees, flowers, birds, water." (New Heaven and Earth)

How much better, Lawrence realized, to get out of yourself and into the world, the world of people, the world of nature. In another lovely poem, "The Wild Common," the poet is alive - not with self alone - but in relationship with the world outside himself, in this instance a beautiful, idyllic space in the woods.

> "How splendid it is to be substance, here!
> My shadow is neither here nor there: But I,
> I am royally here!
> All that is right, all that is good,
> All that is God takes substance."

The Gospel of Jesus Christ suggests that life gets good and exciting and interesting when we get out of self. Life is an adventure of love. That is the Christian secret. In Jesus Christ, God our creator summons us to realize the fullness of our humanity, and to discover the meaning of life by shifting the focus - away from ourselves to others, to redirect the energy from introspection to the world outside ourselves. It is not a philosophic shift, by the way. The author of the Epistle of John moved from soaring abstractions to concrete realities: "We move from death to life because we love," and then several sentences later..."But if anyone has the world's goods and sees someone in need, yet closes his heart, how does God's love abide in that person?"

Martin Marty recently cited a prayer which if we haven't prayed we surely understand. "Use me Lord, use even me. But preferably in an advisory capacity." Christian love is tangible, practical: it has to do with flesh and blood people who need us.

So today the rhythm is from theology to the Board of Trustees: from thoughtful reflections on the meaning of life to the lengthy meetings of the Organ Committee; from sermons on love to budget hearings. The people who are today ordained and installed, and all those who serve the church in every day, pragmatic ways, are eloquently expressing the truth of the Gospel. Love is practical. Love reaches out and makes life better, happier, safer, healthier, for others. Love discovers that the happiest thing in the world is someone else's happiness.

How to live? The noble example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests that there is more to the answer than managing to stay alive for 70 or 80 or 90 years. It is a matter of loving deeply. It is a matter of taking sides, of caring deeply about the world and all its agonizing complexity. The Christian prescription for full life is to care deeply about life everywhere: to make choices: to learn and understand and have opinions about brothers and sisters in Central America, in the desperate ghettoes of South Africa, in wretched refugee camps in Ethiopia. The Christian prescription is to love life everywhere: to become vulnerable; to love enough to experience the hurt whenever and wherever human life is denied, exploited, diminished, oppressed.

To the ancient question: "How shall we live fully?" the faith answers, Love... love the people God gives you to love; love them with strength and kindness and ultimate loyalty. Love them by listening to them, by taking into your own hearts their joys, hopes, aspirations, disappointments, and fears. Love school and church and community. Love your nation enough to expect it to be a noble as its noble principals. Love it enough to weep when it is less than that. Love the whole wide wonderful world God has given, and love the God who made it to give.

The meaning of our humanity is established when we love enough to make some choices and commitment, when we put our lives in the service of some cause. Each of us decides, therefore, to live fully or not to live fully.

What makes those propositions a proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and not just sound psychological advice is that their turth has been demonstrated. God has put his life on the line. God has allowed himself to be defined as love - love fully lived out in Jesus: love lived in serving, healing, teaching, and dying. The truth is you and I have been loved - are loved by God. And in Jesus Christ, summoned to all the glorious fullness of life as God conceived and created it. We are invited to love's adventure - for life, and forever. Amen.